https://doi.org/10.3126/nelta.v30i1.87799




ISSN: 2091-0487

# Localizing the Global Goals: The Impact of Domestic Human Rights Issues on Japanese EFL Students' Engagement with the SDGs

**Robert Sheridan**
**Kathryn M. Tanaka**

## Abstract

In recent years, an increasing number of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks centered on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been developed. However, many emphasize global issues, leading to ―SDGs burnout‖ as students struggle to relate to the content meaningfully. This study investigates the effectiveness of integrating domestic and international human rights topics into SDGs-related materials to increase student engagement and shape perceptions of their country's role in addressing SDGs-related issues. Over a fifteen-week semester, 58 lower-intermediate EFL students in Japan designed and taught lessons using SDGs-related articles featuring local and global human rights themes. Pre- and post-study questionnaires measured changes in students' attitudes toward Japan's role in addressing domestic and international SDGs-related issues, as well as their interest and connection to the materials. Results showed a statistically significant increase in interest and relatability when domestic issues were included. While perspectives on Japan's domestic role remained largely unchanged, possibly due to a ceiling effect, views on its international role increased slightly, although not significantly. Qualitative responses identified empathy, awareness, and exposure to diverse perspectives as key factors contributing to interest and relatability. These findings suggest integrating local and global content may sustain student engagement and mitigate SDGs burnout.

***Keywords:*** *SDGs in EFL education, culturally relevant materials, human rights, and social justice issues*

## Background

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become a popular topic in Japanese media and education at all levels, from elementary schools to universities. However, a growing body of evidence suggests that students may be increasingly disengaged from the content. This phenomenon, referred to as ―SDGs burnout‖ (Kobayashi, 2023; Sheridan & Tanaka, 2024), may

occur when students repeatedly study the SDGs across various courses yet struggle to connect them to their everyday lives in meaningful ways.

This lack of sustained interest may result from an ongoing bias in how the SDGs are presented in educational materials in Japan. As highlighted in a previous study by Sheridan and Tanaka (2024), SDGs-focused content in Japan is often framed through a Global South perspective, portraying the goals as issues that primarily need to be resolved in countries outside of Japan rather than within it (Honma & Yamamoto, 2021; Sasajima, Kojima, Abe, Sato, Kudo, & Kavanagh, 2021; Sasajima, Takagi, Kudo, Sato, Joe, & Seubert, 2022). While some textbooks (Nakatani, 2020; Oseki & McManus, 2021; Yoshihara, Hayashi, Itoi, Iwamoto, & Morrell, 2022) include a limited number of examples of local issues in Japan, such as food waste or unethical business practices, there is a lack of sustained engagement with culturally familiar contexts, and examples of domestic social justice and human rights issues are often absent. The failure to include local issues in studies of the SDGs obscures the fact that Japan is a multicultural and multilingual society, and even within its own borders, issues related to the SDGs are important.

Research has shown that failing to incorporate culturally familiar contexts in educational materials may not be the most effective approach for introducing second-language (L2) learners to topics such as the SDGs. Several studies conducted both within and outside Japan have found that culturally familiar materials improve comprehension (Alptekin, 2006; Demir, 2012; Erten & Razi, 2009; Jalilifar & Assi, 2008; Sheridan, Tanaka, & Hogg, 2019a, Sheridan, Tanaka, & Tang, 2019b; Tavakoli, Shirinbakhsh, & Rezazadeh, 2013), vocabulary retention (Chihara, Sakurai, & Oller, 1989; Demir, 2012; Pulido, 2004; Sasaki, 2000; Sheridan et al., 2019a, 2019b), and student interest and engagement (Sheridan, Tanaka, & Hogg, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2019a, 2019b). Moreover, a study by Sheridan and Condon (2020) showed that L2 learners at the university level in Japan self-selected culturally familiar reading topics over culturally unfamiliar ones nearly three-quarters of the time when given the autonomy to choose their own reading passages.

Additionally, current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educational materials related to the SDGs often fail to connect the goals with current social justice and human rights issues. Although interest in the SDGs has grown alongside increased awareness of social justice and human rights in education, and with growing attention to these issues in the media and popular culture, this has coincided with greater recognition of the importance of educators incorporating social justice and human rights education into their teaching practices (Boyd, 2017; Cates, 2016; Sheridan & Tanaka, 2024). However, as with culturally familiar contexts, social justice and human rights issues remain underrepresented in EFL textbooks in Japan. Therefore, this present study builds on earlier research by Sheridan and Tanaka (2024), which demonstrated that using culturally familiar examples and focusing on issues connected to social justice can be an effective way to engage university students, particularly those who have been studying the SDGs for years and may be experiencing SDGs burnout.

To clarify key terms used in this sutdy, it is important to define the main concepts that informaed the class project. Broadly speaking, the class project relied on three global core concepts and their interconnections: the concept of social problems or issues, the concept of human rights,

and the idea of social justice. Although a broad discussion of these three pillars is beyond the scope of the current paper, it is important to note that the contemporary belief that every person, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, or any other attribute, has inherent and fundamental human rights was codified in the 1948 United Nations‘ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). In practice, the granting and protection of human rights vary significantly based on numerous factors, including nationality. However, internationally, after 1948, a growing awareness of human rights as a universal concept began to spread, alongside the understanding that violations of human rights represent a social issue that could be addressed through social justice movements. Sociologist KiyoteruTsutsui has made this connection in the case of Japan, arguing that ―global human rights‘ ideas changed minority groups‘ understandings of their social standing in Japanese society and their resulting entitlement to rights while international human rights institutions and activist networks facilitated such claims‖ (Tsutsui, 2018, p. 6). Furthermore, because many social problems that human rights movements and social justice activism sought to address were the same issues highlighted by the SDGs, orienting the class around the pillars of human rights, social justice, and the SDGs meant that students could begin to see the connections between the abstract goals and their daily lives. Thus, human rights led to awareness and recognition of inequalities and problems in society, which in turn fueled social justice movements and activist networks aiming to bridge these gaps. In the class, all three concepts were interconnected.

In addition to these three core concepts, another important theme that emerged through our analysis was empathy as a pillar of global education. Empathy and the importance of emotional sympathy and compassion in education have been foregrounded for decades. After World War Two, Theodor W. Adorno argued for a pedagogy that would prevent the repetition of the atrocities of that conflict (Adorno,1998a), which he stated were caused by ―coldness,‖ or ―an indifference to the fate of others‖ (p. 201). For Adorno, empathy, or sympathy for others, is created in part by self-reflection in education and the recognition of emotions in oneself. This, in turn, was the cornerstone of a just and democratic education (Adorno, 1998c, 187). Adorno positions self-reflection and sympathy with others as affective pedagogy specifically designed to ensure ―never again Auschwitz‖ (Adorno,1998a, p. 191). Scholars today emphasize this critical, emotional pedagogy as ―the model for a type of education against right-wing extremism‖ (Zembylas, 2021, p. 810).

In more recent years, scholars such as Daniel Goleman have expanded on the importance of empathy to liberal societies by defining different forms of empathy: cognitive empathy, which is the ability to understand the perspective of different people; emotional empathy, or sensing what another person is feeling and sharing their emotions with them; and compassionate empathy, or being inspired by the shared emotion to a desire to help others (Goleman, 2008). He further argues that these are skills that can be taught in schools and are integral for success in a globalized world (Goleman, 1995).

Thus, lack of empathy, or lack of sympathy for others, according to Adorno and the many scholars who followed in his wake at the end of the Second World War, was what allowed society to fracture into groups of us and them. The rhetoric of dehumanization that made Auschwitz

possible marked certain groups of people as not deserving of empathy, compassion, human dignity, or equality, a pattern that continues today (Stanley, 2020, pp. 120-121). In that sense, the importance of empathy as a core tenet of human rights education is stronger than ever. This is underscored by the fact that although liberal values such as human dignity, equity, and equality were explicitly discussed in the course, empathy and compassion were not explicitly built into the course, yet students intuitively foregrounded the importance of empathy in their responses, indicating that the notion of empathy was foundational to the other topics discussed in the course.

## Research Questions

The study aims to investigate the attitudes of EFL university students toward lessons designed for SDGs education in a way that highlights both domestic (Japanese) and global human rights issues. By focusing on domestic human rights issues that are not commonly included in educational materials in Global North countries such as Japan, it is hypothesized that the learners‘ perceptions of their home country‘s role in achieving the SDGs, as well as their interest in and connection to the educational materials, will significantly change. Specifically, this study tests the following research questions:

RQ1: Will learners perceive a greater need for Japan to focus on solving problems related to the SDGs domestically, with a decreased emphasis on solving these issues abroad? RQ2: Will learners‘ interest in and relatability to SDGs educational materials improve when Japanese human rights issues are incorporated?

RQ3: Due to learners‘ increased interest in and relatability to SDGs educational materials, which include Japanese human rights issues, will interest in and relatability to global issues decrease?

## Methodology

### Participants

Fifty-eight lower intermediate-level EFL students (46 female and 12 male) enrolled in Global Studies programs at two public universities in western Japan consented to participate in this study. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 and were part of one of five intact classes, all of which were elective courses taught to first and second-year students. These courses were offered within departments that emphasized global studies. One of the authors taught the classes and collected the data for this study. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all collected data was treated anonymously and confidentially. Informed consent was obtained from participants before and after the study, through pre- and poststudy questionnaires. Initially, 64 participants were involved in the study; however, six did not complete both questionnaires and were thus excluded from the final analysis.

## Materials Design

### *Instruments for Data Collection*

Participants were given a bilingual questionnaire via a Google Form at both the beginning and end of the study. The questionnaires included six Likert-scale questions aimed at assessing learners' attitudes towards Japan's role in achieving the SDGs, as well as perceptions of integrating domestic and global human rights issues to enhance the interest and relatability of educational materials. Participants rated the following six statements on a 6-point interval scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree).

The first two items addressed the hypothesis that attitudes towards Japan's focus on domestic versus international SDG-related issues would change:

1. In order to achieve the goals of the SDGs, Japan needs to focus on solving problems in its own country.

2. In order to achieve the goals of the SDGs, Japan needs to focus on solving problems in other countries.

The next two items explored attitudes towards incorporating Japanese human rights issues in the SDGs educational materials:

3. Using human rights issues in Japan in SDGs educational materials makes the materials more interesting.

4. Using human rights issues in Japan in SDGs educational materials makes the materials more relatable.

The final two items investigated attitudes towards using global human rights issues in SDGs educational materials:

5. Using global human rights issues in SDGs educational materials makes the materials more interesting.

6. Using global human rights issues in SDGs educational materials makes the materials more relatable.

Participants completed the same questionnaire post-study to evaluate changes in their attitudes after the interaction. Questionnaire items were translated into Japanese by a Japanese professor of English at one author's university and verified by a second Japanese speaker at the other author's university to ensure accuracy.

## *Student-Selected Articles*

The number of articles developed by students varied depending on the number of students enrolled in each elective course. The class with the fewest students developed a total of four lessons, for which students created the homework reading assignments and the lectures. In contrast, the class with the highest enrollment had ten lessons that were developed and taught by students. Students were given guidelines for choosing an article that included the following points:

1. The article must be written in English and related to topics we are scheduled to study in the class you teach.
2. You can use one article as it is, or you can edit it. The article can be shortened, or you may add additional information from other sources. In such cases, however, you must be careful to cite ALL of your sources and indicate the changes you have made.
3. Think about how the article will help you lead a discussion you think is important in class.
4. The article should be around 1,500 words in English.
5. The article should be based around human rights in Japan, but also have connections to global issues.
6. You must submit the article two weeks before you teach.

After the students selected an article, they submitted it along with their edits to the instructor. The instructor then modified the articles using AntWordProfiler (Anthony, 2022) to ensure the articles were of a similar level across the course. In some cases, the instructor added information or removed unnecessary sections to ensure all students could read and understand the material. Whenever possible, the instructor preserved the students‘ original contributions. Allowing students to self-select the article on which to base their lessons gave them greater autonomy and enabled them to cover topics they felt were most relevant or interesting. This approach allowed for a wider variety of viewpoints and perspectives to be introduced to the class.

Students selected articles from a diverse array of sources, including United Nations websites, international NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as newspapers in Japan or around the world. They often gravitated towards different perspectives. For example, students teaching on indigenous issues in Japan actually chose an article from a French news source (France 24) that highlighted challenges faced by the Ainu people. They were then able to incorporate video interviews with one of the men featured in the article and Japanese news sources to extend the lesson. In this way, students were not only exposed to different ways of talking about the same issue, but also practiced synthesizing content across media and cultural contexts.

To support language learning, students were encouraged, as part of their presentation to the class, to create vocabulary lists from their articles, prepare short summaries, and design follow-up

activities (such as comprehension questions, quizzes, discussion prompts, or roleplays). These tasks helped balance content learning with EFL skill development, ensuring that human rights issues were accessible while also serving as a vehicle for practicing reading comprehension, speaking, and writing. Engaging with complex, real-world issues in this way enabled students to expand their vocabulary and challenge themselves to deal with difficult topics using the language skills they had, including discussing issues like human rights, refugees, policies, nationality, or minority languages.

Teachers can easily replicate this project in their own classrooms using the guidelines given above. The key to this project is focusing on locally relevant human rights issues, supplemented by international comparisons. In the rare case where a student did not find a suitable article, the teacher was able to add supplemental information to create a text that was appropriate. The main drawback of this approach is the significant burden it places on the instructor to edit and adjust the complexity of the texts to suit learner levels. However, in general, students tended to select level-appropriate texts.

### *Class Assignment*

Each week, for a minimum of four weeks and a maximum of ten, students read and completed a discussion worksheet for one of 13 article-based lessons. At a minimum, the first three lessons were instructor-led examples to show the students what was expected, while students prepared and taught the remaining eight lessons (see Appendix A). Each student taught one of the articles in pairs or groups of three, depending on class size.

The project was introduced during the second class, before the first instructor-led article was taught. For homework, students were asked to select four topics of interest for their project and rank them in order of preference from 1 - 4. Based on their preferences, the teacher assigned students to a topic the following week. A detailed description of the assignment is given in Appendix B. A handout of presentation language (see Appendix C) was provided to help support students with varying levels of language proficiency.

## Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of the Data

Paired sample t tests were conducted to assess significant differences in learners‘ attitudes towards SDGs education lessons presenting domestic and global human rights issues, with global ones before and after the intervention. To control for Type 1 error across the six comparisons, a p value of less than .008 (0.05/6) was required for significance using the Bonferroni approach. Effect sizes were measured using Cohen‘s d to determine the magnitude of mean differences between pre- and post-study questionnaire responses. Follow-up surveys were conducted after the statistical analysis to explore differences in participants‘ pre- and post-study responses, with each survey tailored to individual students based on their set of responses.

## Results and Discussion

### RQ 1: Learners' attitudes toward Japan's role in solving domestic and global issues to achieve the SDGs

To investigate the effect of incorporating domestic human rights issues in SDGs educational materials on learners' attitudes toward Japan's role in solving domestic and international problems to achieve the SDGs, two paired-samples t tests were performed.

***Table 1.*** *Attitudes towards Japan's role in solving problems abroad and at home*

| Pairs | Test | Mean | SD | Diff. of Mean Post-Pre | *t* | *df* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1: Japan's role in solving problems at home | Pre | 5.22 | 0.97 | 0.11 | 0.93 | 57 | .359 |
| | Post | 5.33 | 0.94 | | | | |

Pair 2: Japan's role in Pre 4.22 1.15 solving problems
abroad 0.50 3.17 57 .002
Post 4.72 1.16

***Note:*** *A p value of less than .008 was required for significance using the Bonferroni approach*

The first paired-samples t test was conducted to evaluate whether the learners' perception of Japan's need to focus on domestic SDG-related issues increased pre- to post-study. The results, as displayed in Table 1, indicated that the mean attitudes post-study were higher; however, this difference was not statistically significant (t (57) = 0.93, p = .359). The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from -.14 to .38. The second pairedsamples t test was performed to assess whether the learners' perception of Japan's need to focus on international SDG-related issues changed pre- to post-study. The results, also shown in Table 1, revealed that the mean attitudes post-study were significantly higher (t

(57) = 3.17, p = .002). As assessed by Cohen's d, the effect size was d = .41, which is considered a small to medium effect. Cohen (1992) suggests that d = 0.2 represents a small effect size, 0.5 is a medium effect size, and 0.8 is a large effect size. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from .15 to .68.

These findings do not support our hypothesis that learners would perceive a greater need for Japan to focus on domestic SDG issues while decreasing emphasis on international ones. However, after closer examination of the descriptive statistics, these differences may be explained in part by a ceiling effect (i.e., where participants beginning with a score at or towards the upper limit cannot demonstrate any or much upward change). In response to the first question on the pre-

study questionnaire, out of the 58 participants, 31 selected a rating of 6, while another 22 chose a rating of 5 on the 6-point Likert scale. Thus, a majority of participants already held strong beliefs about Japan‘s involvement in addressing SDG-related issues domestically, reflected in the overall pre-study mean score of 5.22. Conversely, participants did not believe as strongly in Japan‘s role in addressing problems abroad prestudy, with a mean score of 4.22. This allowed for greater upward change in the participants‘ post-study responses. Despite a significant increase in attitudes towards Japan‘s role in solving SDG problems abroad, the overall perception remained post-study that a greater focus was needed on domestic issues (M = 5.33) compared to international ones (M = 4.72).

Post-study follow-up surveys reinforced this. For example, one student noted that they actually studied more of Japan‘s perspective in compulsory education, writing: ―I knew many, but not all, of the human rights issues in Japan. We Japanese learn a lot of things in the process of compulsory education. At university, I thought that incorporating foreign perspectives into what we have learned so far would make the material more interesting.‖ Another student echoed this, stating: ―I know Japan has many problems, it is necessary to lead ourselves.‖ A third student also reported that their high school education focused on SDGs in Japan, so they believed Japan had a lot of work to do with SDGs in Japan, but the class allowed them, for the first time, to connect the SDGs to human rights issues, so in that sense, it was valuable. Perhaps educators in more high schools are teaching about the SDGs issues in Japan, making students aware of their importance, and in this case, the connection of the SDGs to human rights might increase interest for students. This idea hints at the necessity for a new evaluation not only of textbooks but also of how materials related to human rights and the SDGs are being taught in high schools in Japan.

A possible explanation for the significant increase in students‘ attitudes towards Japan‘s role in solving SDG problems abroad could be that the materials demonstrated that these problems are not limited to Global South countries. By providing a balanced array of examples highlighting issues faced by both Global North and South nations, the materials may have shed light on the global severity of these problems. As a result, students may have come to believe that Japan should exert greater effort to help solve these issues.

Student feedback supports this idea. For example, one student wrote that their answer changed because: ―it is necessary to lead both ourselves and others to a better situation, not just to be good only for ourselves.‖ Another student echoed this, writing that: ―Japan could do more to help change human rights around the world, because many of the problems were shared by many countries.‖ Finally, a third noted that ―seeing examples from Japan and a variety of countries was incredibly useful to them to allow them to see a full and broad picture.‖ Thus, taken as a whole, the student feedback indicates that for many, the inclusion of Japan-related materials was useful in creating a connection, but the global focus was more important for students in the course.

**RQ 2: Incorporation of domestic human rights issues in SDGs educational materials to increase student interest and relatability**

To assess the impact of incorporating domestic human rights issues in SDGs educational materials to increase student interest and relatability, two paired-samples t tests were performed.

***Table 2.*** *Attitudes towards domestic human rights issues to improve interest and relatability*

| Pairs | Test | Mean | SD | Diff. of Mean Post-Pre | *t* | *df* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 3: HR Issues in Japan to Improve Interest | Pre | 4.71 | 1.08 | 0.58 | 3.72 | 57 | < .001 |
| | Post | 5.29 | 0.92 | | | | |
| Pair 4: HR Issues in Japan to Improve Relatability | Pre | 4.64 | 1.09 | 0.50 | 3.02 | 57 | .004 |
| | Post | 5.14 | 0.98 | | | | |

***Note:*** *A p value of less than .008 was required for significance using the Bonferroni approach*

The first paired-samples t test was conducted to determine whether incorporating domestic human rights issues in SDGs educational materials increased student interest pre- to poststudy. The results, as shown in Table 2, indicated that the mean attitudes post-study were significantly higher (t (57) = 3.72, p = < .001). As assessed by Cohen‘s d, the effect size was d = .49, which is considered a small to medium effect. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from .21 to .76. The second paired-samples t test was conducted to evaluate whether incorporating domestic human rights issues in SDGs educational materials improved relatability pre- to post-study. The results, also displayed in Table 2, revealed that the mean attitudes post-study were significantly higher (t (57) = 3.02, p = .004). The effect size, as measured by Cohen‘s d, was d = .40, indicating a small effect. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from .13 to .66. These results provide strong support for the hypothesis that incorporating domestic human rights issues enhances learners‘ interest in and relatability to SDGs educational materials.

Student responses to the individualized follow-up surveys revealed several possible explanations for these results. First, as we hypothesized, some students did in fact feel the SDGs had very little connection to their daily lives, and by using domestic human rights issues, the connections were made clearer, and students were better able to relate to the material. One student said: ―Honestly, I have been feeling that some topics of SDGs are not related to me, and I had thought that solving problems that I cannot see was a hard thing. However, human rights issues that I learned in this class changed my mind about SDGs. I learned that human rights are something that many problems have in common, and thus, it can become a factor that I can feel sympathy towards many other people.‖ In addition to creating commonalities, this response is interesting because it makes explicit that this class was a way to create feelings of sympathy or empathy in facing

a common problem. The idea of connecting the material to students‘ lives as a sympathetic or empathetic exercise appeared in several student responses. For example, a second student wrote: ―Through the course, I learned that human rights issues (especially the real story of someone) are enhance our ability to empathize with others. That’s why I thought that SDGs educational materials, including global human rights issues are more interesting material for students.‖ Similarly, other student feedback noted that no matter where people were, if they: ―faced the same problem together they can be sympathy [and] understand each other better.‖

A second reason students responded positively to domestic issues was that they valued considering Japanese issues alongside international issues because it allowed students to see the issue from multiple different viewpoints. One student wrote: ―Human rights issues in Japan are human rights issues in other countries, so I felt that it would be better to create teaching materials with a mix of perspectives rather than completely from a non-Japanese perspective.‖ A second student highlighted the fact that using multiple viewpoints allowed them to see issues more holistically and as interconnected, when they wrote: ―Through the class, I gained a deeper understanding of the relationship between human rights and refugees and immigrants, and it made me think about the challenges faced by individuals from different backgrounds and cultures. In particular, I learned the importance of protecting the rights of refugees and migrants from a human rights perspective and the need for society as a whole to foster a culture of acceptance. By considering these issues from an international perspective, we recognized the importance of cross-border cooperation and the essential need to improve social acceptance. We learned that international cooperation and understanding on these topics is essential and recognized the need for positive change in future societies.‖ By thinking globally and locally at the same time, students were able to take perspectives from other countries that might be beneficial in Japan, such as another student who wrote that: ―I think the class mainly focused on Japanese issue regarding refugees and they also mentioned about other examples like in Germany. That makes us easier to get interested in this topic and to understand the current situations [around the world]. I also learned in the other class that current Germany politicians… suggest that they would allow double nationalities or possibilities of extension of stay [for refugees], so I believe that those perspectives will be needed to Japanese system toward refugees.‖ This indicates that not only did students find the material more approachable, but that they were actively engaging with examples from abroad and thinking about what ideas might help change Japanese society.

Related to this point, a third reason may be that the inclusion of domestic issues actually made students aware of problems they had not thought about or engaged with before. ―I learned that there are a lot of unsolved human rights issues in Japan... The class was interesting because it made me realize that there are still problems in Japan,‖ one student wrote, and this was echoed by other students who gave similar feedback: ―I learned what I didn‘t know in Japan,‖ and ―I got a new idea about human rights in Japan.‖ A final student wrote: ―I thought about Japan in new ways.‖

The evocation of empathy and sympathy here may be important hints for further research. As discussed above, in the decades after the Second World War, empathy emerged as a key

component in pedagogies that were designed to prevent a repetition of the atrocities of the Second World War, and it remains a crucial ability for liberal societies today. In the student feedback, students demonstrated that through the study of human rights issues, they have effectively learned to communicate affective empathy (—I can feel sympathy toward many other people‖) and cognitive empathy (—I gained a deeper understanding of the relationship between human rights and refugees and immigrants‖). Indeed, in light of the students‘ comments, it became clear that many class discussions were also exercises in compassionate empathy, with students brainstorming together to find solutions to the problems we discussed.

These replies also indicate that students had more nuanced perspectives, showing a connection of local and global issues through empathy for both (—I also learned in the other class that current Germany politicians… suggest that they would allow double nationalities or possibilities of extension of stay [for refugees], so I believe that those perspectives will be needed to Japanese system toward refugees‖). Through empathy, students are better able to connect issues in Japan to issues in other countries, and this, in turn, requires them to reflect on Japanese society and domestic issues within Japan. Furthermore, repeating global examples such as Germany that were mentioned in class indicates students were comprehending and re-articulating information across sources through empathetic connections, which is evidence of reading comprehension and synthesis.

Thus, while the notion of empathy in language education was not part of our hypothesis for this study, student responses and the repeated use of the terms —empathy‖ and —sympathy‖ within them indicate this was, in fact, a core component of what students learned and indeed foundational to the class.

## RQ 3: Incorporation of global human rights issues in SDGs educational materials to enhance student interest and relatability

Finally, to investigate the learners‘ attitudes towards the use of global human rights issues in SDGs educational materials in combination with domestic human rights issues to increase learner interest and relatability, two separate paired-samples t tests were conducted.

***Table 3.*** *Attitudes towards foreign human rights issues to improve interest and relatability*

| Pairs | Test | Mean | SD | Diff. of Mean Post-Pre | *t* | *df* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 5: Global HR Issues to Improve Interest | Pre | 5.05 | 1.08 | 0.28 | 1.85 | 57 | .070 |
| | Post | 5.29 | 0.98 | | | | |
| Pair 6: Global HR | Pre | 4.72 | 1.12 | | | | |
| Issues to Improve 0.12 0.73 57 .468 Relatability Post 4.84 1.20 | | | | | | | |

***Note:*** *A p value of less than .008 was required for significance using the Bonferroni approach*

The first paired-samples t tests were conducted to evaluate whether the learners‘ attitudes towards using global human rights issues in SDGs educational materials, to make the materials more interesting, changed from the pre- to post-study questionnaires. The results, presented in Table 3, indicated that the mean attitudes post-study were slightly higher; however, this difference was not statistically significant ($t(57) = 1.85$, $p = .070$). The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from -.02 to .50. The second pairedsamples t test was performed to assess whether the learners‘ attitudes towards using global human rights issues in SDGs educational materials, to make the materials more relatable, changed from the pre- to post-study questionnaires. The results, also displayed in Table 3, indicated that the mean attitudes post-study were slightly higher ($t(57) = 0.73$, $p = .468$); however, no significant difference was found. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from -.16 to .35.

While these results show a slight increase in student interest and relatability to global human rights issues, these differences were not statistically significant. Although the inclusion of Japanese human rights issues may have had some effect on student interest and relatability to global human rights issues, it did not decrease them as we hypothesized. Follow-up surveys provide further insights into these findings. First, as stated above, there is some support for the idea that the inclusion of Japanese human rights issues increased student feelings of sympathy or empathy. However, as the previous analysis indicates, this feeling of empathy appears to be created, in part, through the combined use of examples from Japan and other countries. This may indicate that Japanese examples alone, or studies from foreign countries alone, are not as effective as readings that use both Japanese and foreign examples. Students were more able to feel empathy when examples included contexts they were familiar with, giving them the necessary scaffolding. In a world where empathy is increasingly under attack as a weakness, helping students understand that empathy is a vital tool for connection, even on a global scale, is incredibly important, making these findings intriguing. The fact that so many students used the keywords ―empathy‖ or ―sympathy‖ in their responses further reveals that students themselves felt this was one of the more important elements of the lessons. This insight suggests important avenues for further study into how nativization and local contextualization of global issues may support feelings of empathy that then translate into real-world tools for global communication.

## Limitations

Although this study provides valuable insights into the integration of human rights content into SDGs education, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. First, the absence of a control group means that, although connections can be observed, definite causal claims about the efficacy of the intervention cannot be made. Second, the sample was drawn from Global Studies programs at two institutions, where students may have had a greater interest in the topics presented. These students may have had higher baseline interest in human rights issues and global engagement, which limits the generalizability of these findings to broader EFL populations, including students from other majors, private institutions, or vocational settings. Third, as students selected the articles and issues they found most engaging, some degree of self-selection bias may have occurred. While this autonomy may have enhanced motivation,

it also raises the possibility that students predisposed to interest in social justice topics were overrepresented in the results. Similarly, reliance on voluntary qualitative survey responses likely amplified the voices of the most motivated students, potentially underrepresenting quieter or less confident class members. Additionally, high pre-study scores on items related to Japan suggest a possible ceiling effect, limiting measurable gains on domestic issues.

Finally, empathy emerged as a central theme in student reflections, despite not being systematically included in the course design or analysis framework. Although this unexpected emphasis is significant, the reliance on self-reported empathy limits claims about depth or behavioral outcomes. Future studies could further explore broader, post-World War Two affective pedagogies within the context of SDGs education. Mixed-methods research could more rigorously examine the relationship between empathy, language development, and social justice education. Finally, expanding the research to a wider range of institutional contexts would help assess whether these findings are transferable across different settings.

## Implications and Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of incorporating domestic and global human rights issues into SDGs educational materials. The findings provide some support for our hypotheses that culturally relevant, engaging materials that draw from both global and local contexts can be an effective method for teaching the SDGs, with a focus on human rights and social justice. While student attitudes toward Japan's role in addressing international human rights issues significantly increased, their views on domestic issues did not change significantly, likely due to a ceiling effect, as many students already strongly supported Japan's domestic role prior to the study. Nevertheless, students consistently highlighted domestic examples as a bridge to global understanding, emphasizing how local issues served as an entry point to empathy, reflection, and broader intercultural awareness.

Furthermore, the inclusion of domestic human rights issues enhanced both interest and relatability to the material. The qualitative data revealed that students valued seeing Japanese and international cases side by side because the local examples helped students relate to more abstract global concepts and evoked feelings of empathy and personal connection. This dual framing encouraged perspective-taking, comparisons across contexts, and reflection on how global models might inform domestic challenges. In particular, exposure to global and local human rights concerns appeared to foster empathetic engagement. This may suggest that presenting both domestic and foreign issues together may provide scaffolding that supports student understanding and fosters emotional resonance more effectively than using either global or local perspectives alone.

These findings highlight the potential of combining globally and locally focused human rights-based approaches in SDGs education, particularly in fostering empathy, which students repeatedly identified as a key learning outcome. These findings suggest that educators might more intentionally scaffold empathy by incorporating first-person accounts, structured reflection, and intercultural comparisons into EFL and global studies classrooms. Doing so not only deepens

engagement with social justice topics but also supports language development by requiring students to articulate complex perspectives, adopt new vocabulary, and negotiate meaning across cultural contexts. In that sense, empathy is not an incidental outcome but can be conceptualized as a pedagogical goal, aligned with Adorno‘s call for reflective, humanizing education.

Although there is a need for further study, the emotional engagement derived from relatable domestic content may serve as a powerful tool in increasing global engagement and interest. While methodological limitations warrant caution in interpretation, the strong emergence of empathy in student reflections points to its significance as both an outcome and a pedagogical tool. Thus, this study revealed important avenues for further research, especially the role of empathy in language education as a means to increase student interest in course materials. It also suggested that students continue to view global human rights issues, social justice, and activism as important educational topics, in particular when grounded in culturally familiar contexts. In considering these questions, educators may be better positioned to design learning experiences that support globally minded, empathetic, and linguistically capable students prepared to engage with the complexities of a world in which we continue to pursue education for ―no more Auschwitz.‖

## Declarations and Acknowledgement:

This research was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science under grant 23K00665.

## The Authors:

**Robert Sheridan** (M.S.Ed. in TESOL) is an associate professor at Kindai University. His research interests include vocabulary acquisition, the SDGs in language education, CLIL, student-centered learning, and culture in education. His recent publications include ―Version 1.1 of the SDGs Service List: Vocabulary for Society and Sustainability‖ (Osaka JALT Journal) and ―Global Issues in Local Contexts: Japanese University EFL Learners & Reactions to SDGs Materials‖ (TESL-EJ). He co-authored the EFL textbook Japanese Popular Culture in English: Discussions and Critical Thinking (Nan‘un-Do).

**Kathryn M. Tanaka** (Ph.D.) is a professor at the University of Hyogo. Her research interests include literary and cultural studies, CLIL, and human rights education. Her recent publications include ―On the Body: Makeup, Clothing, and Hansen‘s Disease as Identity‖ (M/C Journal) and ―Global Issues in Local Contexts: Japanese University EFL Learners & Reactions to SDGs Materials‖ (TESL-EJ), among others. She is a co-author of an EFL textbook, Japanese Popular Culture in English: Discussions and Critical Thinking (Nan‘un-Do).

## References

Adorno, T. (1998a). Education after Auschwitz. In H. Pickford (Ed.), *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (pp. 191–204). Columbia UniversityPress. (Original workpublished 1969)

Adorno, T. (1998b). Themeaningofworkingthroughthepast. In H. Pickford (Ed.), *CriticalModels: Interventions and Catchwords* (pp. 89–103). Columbia UniversityPress. (Original workpublished 1963)

Adorno, T. (1998c). Taboosontheteachingvocation. In H. Pickford (Ed), *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (pp. 177–190). Columbia UniversityPress. (Original workpublished 1969)

Alptekin, C. (2006). Cultural familiarity in inferential and literal comprehension in L2 reading. *System, 34*(4), 494-508. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2006.05.003

Anthony, L. (2022). Ant Word Profiler (Version 2.0.1) [Computer Software]. Waseda University. Available from: https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software

Boyd, A. S. (2017). Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom: Teaching Practice in Action (Language and Literacy Series). Teachers College Press.

Cates, K. (2016). Healing colonial pain: English as a bridge between Japan and Korea. In C. Hastings & L. Jacob (Eds.) *Social justice in English language teaching* (pp. 67-82). TESOL Press.

Cohen, J. (1992). A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin, 112*(1), 155-159. https://doi.org/10.1037/00332909.112.1.155

Chihara, T., Sakurai, T., & Oller, J. W., Jr. (1989). Background and culture as factors in EFL reading comprehension. *Language Testing, 6*(2), 143-149. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/026553228900600202

Demir, Y. (2012). The effect of background knowledge and cultural nativization on reading comprehension and vocabulary inference. *Journal of Educational and Instructional Studies in the World, 2*(4), 188-198.

Erten, I., & Razi, S. (2009). The effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 21*, 60-77. https://doi.org/10.10125/66632

France 24. (2023). Japan's Indigenous peoples fight stigma to reclaim identities. France 24. https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230217-japan-s-indigenous-peoples-fight-stigma-toreclaim-identities

Goleman, D. (2008). Hot to Help: When can empathy move us to action? *Greater Good Magazine.*

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ.* Bantam Books.

Honma, S., & Yamamoto, M. (2021). *YasashiEigo de SDGs!* Godo.

Jalilifar, A., & Assi, R. (2008). The role of cultural nativization in comprehension of short stories in EFL reading contexts. *Language, Society and Culture Journal, 26,* 62-79.

Jiang, Y. and Wang, J. (2018). A Study of Cultural Empathy in Foreign Language Teaching from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 8*(12), 16641670.

Kobayashi, Y. (2023, May 8). SDGs tasseikigen made orikaeshi no nen 'SDGs tsukare' no jōkyōmo [As we reach the midway point toward achieving the SDGs, a situation of _SDGs burnout' is also emerging]. *Chūnichi Shimbun.*

Nakatani, Y. (2020). *Academic Writing Strategies: Focus on Global Issues for Sustainable Development Goals.* Kinseido.

Oseki, K., & McManus, K. M. (2021). *Living as Global Citizens: An Introduction to the Sustainable Development Goals.*Nan'un-do.

Pulido, D. (2004). The effect of cultural familiarity on incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading. *The Reading Matrix, 4*(2), 20-53.

Sasajima, S., Kojima, S., Abe, N., Sato, M., Kudo, T., & Kavanagh, B. (2021). *CLIL SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals.* Sanshusha.

Sasajima, S., Takagi, Y., Kudo, T., Sato, M., Joe, L., & Seubert, C. M. R. (2022). *CLIL Primary SDGs.* Sanshusha.

Sasaki, M. (2000). Effects of cultural schemata on students' test-taking processes for cloze tests: A multiple data source approach. *Language Testing, 17*(1), 85-114. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532200017001

Sheridan, R., & Condon, B. (2020). Letting Students Choose: How Culture Influences Text Selection in EFL Reading Courses. *The Journal of Asia TEFL, 17*(2), 523-539. http://dx.doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2020.17.2.14.523

Sheridan, R. & Tanaka, K. M. (2024). Global issues in local contexts: Japanese university EFL learners' reactions to the development of relevant and engaging SDGS materials. *TESL-EJ, 28*(1). https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.28109a4

Sheridan, R., Tanaka, K. & Hogg, N. (2016). English Through Culturally Familiar Contexts: A Pilot Study in Japan. *Language Education in Asia Journal, 7*(2), 88-99.

Sheridan, R., Tanaka, K. & Hogg, N. (2019a). Foreign Language, Local Culture: How Familiar Contexts Impact Learning and Engagement. *TESL-EJ, 23*(1).

Sheridan, R., Tanaka, K., & Tang, D. (2019b). The benefits and use of culturally familiar materials in Japanese university EFL classrooms. *Osaka JALT Journal, 6,* 5-33.

Stanley, J. (2020). *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them.* Random House.

Tavakoli, M., Shirinbakhsh, S., & Rezazadeh, M. (2013). Effect of cultural adaptation on EFL reading comprehension: The role of narrative nativization and foreign language attitude. *World Applied Sciences Journal, 21,* 1587-1596.

Tsutsui, K. (2018). *Rights Make Might: Global Human Rights and Minority Social Movements in Japan.* Oxford University Press.

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universaldeclaration-of-human-rights

Yoshihara, R., Hayashi, C., Itoi, E., Iwamoto, N., & Morrell, A. (2022). *SDGs x Discussion.* Kinseido.

Zembylas, M. (2021). Adorno on democratic pedagogy and the education of emotions: Pedagogical insights for resisting right-wing extremism. *Policy Futures in Education, 19*(7), 809-825.

## Appendix A: An Example Course Outline

## Academic Skills: Social Justice and Human Rights in Japan

### Course Description:

**Academic Communication** is an introductory academic course designed to develop presentation, discussion, critical thinking, and communication skills by thinking deeply about human rights, global issues, and their connection to Japan. How are human rights represented in Japan, and how can we think about social justice issues in Japan more critically, from an academic orientation? The course centers on the intersection of social issues and human rights in Japan, as well as the human and non-human worlds: environmental justice, indigenous issues, gender, health, diaspora, peace, and disability rights. The course introduces academic analysis of these subjects. Students will bring their own texts and interests to teach one class of the semester, where they will select materials, make the PowerPoint and class activities, and lead the class discussion. How are human rights an issue in Japan today, and how can we deepen our understanding of the issue in Japan and abroad? Where are there potential gaps between the text and reality? More importantly, what can we do and what should we be aware of when we address these issues?

### Course aims:

Students will learn to think about important social issues from multiple perspectives, critically analyze media, and express their opinions and ideas in academic English. Students must read academic articles in English on a variety of topics related to global citizenship and Japan's role in international movements. Students will be expected to teach a class, prepare readings, share their reactions, and discuss the readings actively in class. Students will also be expected to do their own research to find more information about the topics discussed in class.

### Technical Requirements:

- Bring a Japanese-English dictionary (NOT your cell phone) to class

### Assignments:

- Read the assigned pages at least once, marking words you do not recognize. Use the glossary and dictionaries to write the meaning of words you do not know.

- Students should be prepared to engage with a variety of media in their assignments and to complete bilingual work.
- Weekly responses in English are after class via Google form.
- Active discussion and participation in class are required
- Students must teach ONE section of the class on a human-rights-related topic of their choice. More information will be provided in class.
- Students must complete an active, creative final project related to a human-rights topic of their choice. Details will be given in class.

**This syllabus may change to reflect student interests and needs. Readings will be determined by class interests and distributed weekly. **

**Weekly Schedule and Assignments**

| Week | Class Material | Teacher(s) |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Introduction Our ideas, schedule, and goals for the semester | |
| 2 | What is social justice? How is it related to human rights, and why is it important in Japan? | Reading and instruction by instructor |
| 3 | What is intersectionality? What are our own positions when we talk about social justice? | Reading and instruction by instructor |
| 4 | Health | Reading and instruction by instructor |
| 5 | Criminal Justice | Reading and instruction by instructor |
| 6 | Military Issues | Pair Teachers: Student A and Student B |
| 7 | Indigenous Issues | Pair Teachers: Student C and Student D |
| 8 | Ethnic Koreans | Pair Teachers Student E and Student F |
| 9 | Gender and Sexuality | Pair Teachers: Student G and Student H |
| 10 | War Pair | Teachers: Student I and Student J |
| 11 | Manga and Human Rights | Instructor |
| 12 | Children | Pair Teachers: Student K, Student L, and Student M |
| 13 | Media and Human Rights | Pair Teachers: Student N and Student O |
| 14 | Final Presentations | |
| 15 | Final Presentations (continued) | |

**Grade Distribution:**

30% Weekly Homework—Reading and Google Responses

30% Preparation and Participation in class

30% Presentation

10% Final

**Grading Expectations:**

1. Reading-based discussions that require students to critically analyze a text, orally summarize reading content, express agreement and disagreement, and pose additional questions relevant to the reading topic
2. Lecture/listening practice that requires students to take notes, organize ideas, report on the contents, and pose additional questions relevant to the listening topic. Students should be able to actively participate in discussions, sharing their ideas and responding to other members' comments.
3. Students should be able to lead their section of the class, which includes selecting a reading, preparing stimulating discussion questions, verbally summarizing reading-related information, and reporting on the contents or conclusions from the discussion.

**Main Textbook:**

Readings and homework will be provided by the instructor. You will need access to a computer (Word and Internet research) to complete assignments.

## Appendix B: Student Guidelines for Peer-teaching

## Guidelines for Choosing an Article

1. The article must be written in English and related to the topics we are scheduled to study in the week you teach.
2. You can use one article as it is, or you can edit it, shorten it, or add information from other sources. In such cases, though, you must be careful to cite ALL of your sources and indicate that you have made changes to your article.
3. Think about how the article will help you build up a discussion you think is important in class.
4. The article must be around 1,500 words in English.
5. It should be based around human rights and Japan, but it can also have connections to global issues if you like.
6. You must give the teacher the article two weeks before you teach.

Student-led Presentations Outline (30% of your final grade)

*Use the ―Presenting an article‖ handout to help you

*Needs to be about 60 minutes, plus discussion

PowerPoint presentation (you must send to your teacher at least two days before your presentation):

1. Introduction
2. Overview
3. Summarizing the article
4. Your opinion (what you think about the article) and extension of the article

   i. What did the article leave out? What would you like to add that is important to you and related to the article? ii. You can use media (videos, etc.) if you have links
5. Discussion questions for class (about the article or themes in the article)
6. Post-reading activities (plan an activity for your classmates about the article/ themes for the class)
7. At the end of your lesson, your classmates can ask you questions

## Appendix C: Presentation Language

### Presenting an Article

### Introduction

Good morning/afternoon. My name is _____. In our presentation today, we would like to report on an article about _____.

### Overview

Before we get started, I'd like to give an overview of our presentation and introduce the members of our group. First, _____ will be talking about the summary of the article.

Next, _____ will be giving our group's opinions about the article.

After that, _____ will be sharing the discussion questions we came up with and leading a class discussion.

Finally, _____ will be leading a post-reading class activity.

### Describing the Article

The title of the article is _____.

It is a story about _____.

It takes place in _____.

We have summarized the article into four main parts.

1. First…
2. Second…
3. Third…
4. Finally…

## Offering your Opinion.

We (strongly) agree/disagree with this article because _____/ We found this article interesting because _____

## Extending the Ideas.

One thing the article neglected to mention that we feel is important is _____ / Based on our further research, we would like to talk about _____ as it relates to the article.

## Discussion Questions

Our group came up with three discussion questions about the article.

1. First…
2. Second…
3. Finally…

We would like to give you 10 minutes to discuss these questions with a partner or in a small group, and then we will choose some people to share their answers with the rest of the class.

## Post-reading Activity

After reading the article, we came up with the following post-reading activity…

Ending Thank you for listening to our presentation today. And now we'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.